

NANCY CANTOR

Civic Engagement

The University as a Public Good

As a public good, universities have a rare and critical role to play. While we educate leaders for the future, we also address important societal issues of the day. Our discoveries can and do change the world. We lay the groundwork for the future as we work to preserve the culture of the past. At the same time, we try out new ways to build community.

The university's role is "rare" because it is positioned to the side of everyday life, unconstrained by requirements for rigid adherence to social norms or intellectual paradigms. The university can foster an experimental attitude—playful, if you will—that can give rise to both intellectual discovery and social innovation.

The university takes on a "critical" role when it opens its gates far enough to listen to the different voices in the debate over the issues of greatest concern to society and to learn about them firsthand. The university must face outward toward work that changes the culture of the day.

We are at our best when we build a community of scholars and learners who feel empowered to be both playful in examining their world and responsible for affecting societal progress. Just as we want to open our gates and look outward, we also want to build model communities on campus to invite the world in as partners.

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Liberal learning and civic engagement
As AAC&U eloquently states in its Statement on Liberal Learning: "Liberal learning is society's best investment in our shared future." Likewise I would argue that the best way for society to fulfill its dreams of a shared, productive, and harmonious future is to maintain universities as public goods. We can do this by intertwining the playfulness of liberal learning as a mode of thought and action with the responsibility of civic engagement with diverse stakeholders whose voices need to matter more in our shared future. In so doing, we will be able to educate socially responsible citizens who will not be complacent in the face of entrenched societal norms, but will take the initiative in shaping our diverse democracy and its global interconnections.¹

This can happen because, at their best, liberal education and civic engagement have much in common. Each requires vibrant and sustained exchanges of both people and ideas. Universities can offer safe havens for people from different backgrounds, races, ethnic groups, and generations to talk, argue, and reflect as equals in exchanges that can and should bridge the boundaries between the university and the wider world.

Now, just one generation away from a time when white children will be the minority in our public schools, children of different races still grow up in different neighborhoods without attending each other's birthday parties, proms, weddings, and funerals. Because they and we do not know each other, the stereotypes that result have led to great inequality and injustice in such vital areas as employment,

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health care, and the criminal justice system.

Mirroring our divisions at home is ethnic, religious, and intergroup conflict in virtually every corner of the globe. The result is untold human and cultural carnage. To make matters worse, we have reacted to the very real pain and losses we have suffered on our own shores by turning inward, “battening the hatches”

if you will, presenting real problems for the free and vital exchanges of people and ideas that are the foundation of our democracy.

The task of universities is urgent: to build on themes of diversity, not only in admissions and in recruiting, but also in creating living and learning communities that will produce a citizenry that is both engaged and informed. It is not enough to affirmatively provide access to educational opportunity. We must also create opportunities and settings in which to pursue true integration. Universities can take a leadership role in shaping a dialogue that goes beyond differences by supporting environments in which students learn from and about each other—environments in which differences are neither privileged nor ignored. (See Patricia Gurin’s discussion of Benjamin Barber’s distinction between ignoring and privileging differences in *Defending Diversity*, 2004.)

Building sustained exchanges:

The arts as a prototype

Universities can fulfill this mission by offering contexts for the exchanges of people and ideas that are sustained, rather than one-shot efforts over a day, a week, or even a semester. These exchanges must appeal to people of different expertise and backgrounds. They should allow for open-mindedness, permit the suspension of everyday norms and judgments, and give standing to everyone, across generations.

In trying to envision how such exchanges might actually work, we might look to the arts—which I would define broadly as “expressive culture” in all forms—for a natural prototype. The arts stand to the side of daily life, and they allow the expression of self and of social tensions in a safe way. They can also forge sustained connections between peoples and ideas and cultures that otherwise either

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simply remain invisible, unexpressed, or worse yet, clash in destructive ways.

As an example, I invite you to consider the blues, a creation of African-Americans that made its way from rural slavery to our nation’s cities, to people and places all over the world with different musical traditions, to young and old, and to other art forms.

It is shown in a brilliant traveling exhibition entitled “Visualizing the Blues,” photographs of the Mississippi Delta collected by the Dixon Gallery and Gardens in Memphis.

In the catalog for this exhibition, which was shown at the Krannert Art Museum at the University of Illinois, Deborah Willis Kennedy (2000) writes, “The blues is a life-and-death struggle. The blues permits the living to defend life/living.” To visualize the blues, one must contend with prejudice and racism, blood and spit, malice and murder.

Ernest Withers took a photograph that illustrates this point. Its title is “Boarding House Bathroom From Which James Earl Ray Shot Dr. King, 422 South Main Street, Memphis, April 1968.” The photograph shows a filthy toilet, an old tub, a pockmarked wall, the open window from which a killer silenced our nation’s greatest voice for peace in the twentieth century. The room is repellent. Normally, we would turn away, but as soon as we realize where we are, we stay to stare. We are at the vantage point of the assassin. The image draws us into dialogue, across history and between groups.

The arts often serve this way, as the medium, not just the reflection, of intergroup dialogue. They offer an escape from the silencing that tends to come in “normal” society, making it possible to face highly charged and even taboo subjects. And everyone has some “standing” in the “conversation” that ensues. In the arts, for example, it is not only diplomats who can discuss and negotiate peace. Without money, limousines, or hotel reservations, children are taking it up, one-to-one, through a “Peace through Poetry” exchange on the Internet, sponsored by iEARN, an international educational and resource network. The sixteen schools participating in this project are located in Chicago, Lithuania, Japan, Bulgaria,

Moscow, and in Urbana, a few blocks from our campus at Illinois.

"Before the war commences the end is clear," writes Rositsa Kuneva, a student from Bulgaria. "All taking part are losers, nobody wins/Never wins the one who fights against his fear/Sluicing down the earth with bloody rinse."²

Dialogues such as these strip away the armor that we think we need to protect our place in the world, and there is nothing quite like the voices of students when they are given standing through artistic expression. The arts demonstrate that the kinds of exchanges we need in the nation's colleges and universities are possible, but we must construct ways for these exchanges to occur.

Exchanges across the boundaries of race and ethnicity

In our increasingly multiracial democracy it is vital that universities create exchanges across the rigid boundaries of race and ethnicity, religion and culture. But the exchanges that come so naturally in the arts need something more in higher education: structures that let these exchanges happen.

Our students, faculty, and community partners need settings in which we can let down our guard, acknowledge each other's standing in the conversation, and feel able to express both discomfort and ignorance. We need to be able to do this formally and informally, on and off

campus, and across the groups in which we have been socialized. Then and only then will our nation come close to realizing the educational benefits of diversity. Then and only then will we begin to more fully embrace the fifty-year-old promise of *Brown v. Board of Education*.

So, why are we in higher education still talking about race? Because our failure to discard the legacy of Jim Crow has left our nation so segregated that our students, for the most part, do not meet as equals until they arrive at our doors. I will never forget a Latina student who told me, "I've never lived with so many white people before." It is up to us to shift that perspective to: "They've never had the chance to live with ME before," with all the opportunities and optimism that implies. We must create learning and living communities that will make true integration possible, and we must create ways to assess how well we're doing.

We must understand that the idea of "civic engagement" goes beyond service or volunteer work. We must immerse ourselves in environments of genuine exchange, and these can start at home, on our own campuses. Vibrant multiracial/multicultural exchanges that bring the issues of society to our doorstep are as much about civic engagement as are our programs in neighboring communities. We should also take the extra step of inviting our community neighbors onto our campuses as we build new models of community.



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Experiments in exchange at Illinois
What would such communities look like? And how can we use what we know about the arts as a model? At Illinois, as on many campuses, we have been asking these questions for several years and I thought it might be useful to describe a few of our efforts, keeping in mind the analogies with the artistic exchanges I have already described.

Exchanges that eschew boundaries. One of the most powerful aspects of artistic exchanges is that they eschew the “normal” boundaries and distinctions of social life—anyone and everyone can be engaged in artistic expression, and frequently these exchanges draw diverse peoples and generations together. In a similar vein, when we created our new Center for Democracy in a Multiracial Society in 2002, we resolved that it would bring together scholars, students, and community activists to engage in conversation about the many racialized positions of different groups and individuals in our society.

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The Center drew its advisory board from the leadership of all of our ethnic studies programs on campus. It invited community activists to come to campus for sabbaticals at the Center. It engaged students from different campus communities in intergroup conversations and



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analyses that go beyond “black and white.” And it funded projects to examine the experience of democracy in daily life from these different positions.

Many of the Center’s initiatives intentionally engage multiple generations of both novices and experts. They circumvent the “silencing” that comes with power and status, and they give “standing” to those who often are the most affected but the least heard. For example, the Center faculty have mobilized with Latino/a community activists in Illinois to address two issues of critical importance to their community—narrowing the K-12 achievement gap and lobbying for the rights of children of undocumented families. As they define what it means to “mobilize with the community,” the goal is to position the families and the students to be heard.

It is the families themselves who are helping to design interventions in the schools. It is our students, many of whom have firsthand experience with being excluded by virtue of their parents’ status, who are speaking to the legislators in Springfield, dialoguing at the Center with statewide leaders of the newest Freedom Rides, and learning in action as they take part in opening up educational opportunity to our fastest-growing student population in Illinois. Their voices have authenticity and power when they are finally given the stage.

Listen to the words of Yesenia Sanchez, who came to our campus on a Freedom Ride:

I am fighting for my dignity. I am an undocumented student and, just like many others, feel helpless because my dreams and goals are being snatched away. I wake up every morning and feel that my life is in limbo, nothing is certain . . . I am also here for my mother. When she was a young girl, she was only able to go up to the sixth grade because she was a woman and was supposed to be at home. She tells me how every night she dreamed about going to school. Her dreams are also mine, and I am determined to be someone.

Exchanges that take a lesson from history. We also take a lesson from the arts in trying to encourage cross-talk about race and opportunity, contrasting historical dreams and contemporary realities. At the moment, for example, we are in the middle of a year-long commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of *Brown v. Board*, honoring those who put their lives on the line for the cause of justice, reexamining their struggle, and rededicating ourselves to their still unfulfilled dream.

At our entering student convocation last August, we began with a speech from the director of our women's studies program, Professor Kal Alston, about what *Brown v. Board* had meant to her African-American family and to her own education in predominantly white schools. We'll end the year with a commencement address by legal scholar and activist, Professor Lani Guinier. In between we have sponsored symposia, performances, book clubs, community research projects and partnerships, and dialogues. We are seeing both synergy and exchange.

As part of the commemoration, we invited back to campus alumni from Project 500, which in 1968 recruited African-American students from all over the nation to enroll at Illinois. As graduates, many continued the struggle for civil rights their entire lives and our current students took note of their lessons. Numbers of current students told us later they were so moved by hearing the stories of this older generation that afterwards they met as a group on their own to do some soul-searching about themselves.

The arts demonstrate that the kinds of exchanges we need in the nation's colleges and universities are possible

In fact, that kind of storytelling and social introspection is a key component in creating new contexts for exchange on campus. The *Brown v. Board* commemoration itself, for example, is now the object of study by undergraduates participating in a new initiative we are calling The Ethnography of the University.

This initiative is giving students the opportunity to examine deliberately their own and their peers' experiences of race at the university and then to report their work, their interviews, their data, and their conclusions on a Web archive for future use by other students as well as faculty, staff, and members of our larger community. As the Web archive develops, we too will be able to better assess the impact of our efforts to foster multiracial exchange.

So far, the students' research on the *Brown v. Board* commemoration indicates that a big event, such as the convocation that all first year students are expected to attend, can make a big difference. Their interviews showed that, while only some of our 38,000 students knew about *Brown*, and many did not, every single first-year student interviewed knew something about it and had something to say. A massive



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1915 Ninety Years in Print

Excerpt from an editorial by Robert L. Kelly, executive secretary of AAC, in the Association's Bulletin, March 1930.

"Instances could be multiplied indefinitely to show that the central purpose of the universities, and even much more the colleges of liberal arts and sciences, is not to provide for the development of 'intellects' of students but for the intellectual life of students. The process to be sure is 'intellectual' in the sense that it aspires to lead to thinking as its goal, but is also aesthetic, moral, social, and religious in the sense that the end sought is the finest possible texture of the student's mind, involves as its ideal a persistent intellectual curiosity, a desire to study, and the power and habit of study."

one-time effort can create interest that then carries over to the book clubs, symposia, performances, and other venues that offer smaller, ongoing contexts for exchange.

Understanding difference in the service of building common cause happens one person at a time, and it requires that we be able to reflect on our experience and see it in relation to the experiences of others. This, of course, is what happens frequently between artist and audience, as each critiques the other's expressions. It is also what is happening to the students who are doing the research in the Ethnography of the University initiative and we hope it is happening with other students as they gather together to reflect on *Brown*.

Living and learning together in safe havens. Of course, nothing can quite match the awakening that occurs when students come together informally as peers, and in those rare but critical moments, let down their guard, shed their protective armor, and enter into what can then become sustained dialogues about diversity.

In this light, I'd like to share a comment from a University of Michigan undergraduate who answered an e-mail request to all students from the president of the Michigan Student Assembly, to describe the impact, positive or negative, of diversity on their lives. This is what she said, in her words, in 1997:

My roommate and I roomed blind. I had no idea whom I would end up with. In mid-August I found out all about her. She was from Detroit and black. This didn't bother me one bit. So far we have gotten along great. . . .

Here is one thing that I found funny. . . .

My roommate has a flat iron that she uses to straighten AND curl her hair with. She had been bugging me for a while to let her try it on my hair. This one Friday night I decided to let her give it a try. . . . So she reached for my hair with her hand so that she could grab a chunk to brush. "EEEE," she shrieked.

"What is that? . . . No, nothing is wrong. I just can't believe what your hair feels like! . . . I've never felt any white girl's hair before," she said. "I had no idea it was so different."

We spent the next hour discussing how we take care of our hair, how much it costs to get it done, and we also argued about what a perm is. This isn't a great educational story, but now I feel a little more "worldly" and not as sheltered as I had before. It's the little things like this that make impacts on my life. Small, but nonetheless important. Diversity helps to make the world a little smaller.

In one brief moment, two students who were already friends and even shared the same room really saw each other in new ways, as women with hair that was different and bad hair days that were the same. One more blind spot disappeared in the slow way things happen when real integration finally occurs, when differences can be affirmed, talked about, and shared.

So how do we foster this sense of safety to express the self and social tensions in non-judgmental and authentic ways in both living and learning environments—and preferably at the place that living and learning intersect? Again using the insight we can get from the arts, compare the difference in the courage of expression we typically see in campus theater to the muted "politeness" of many classroom discussions.

Classroom conversations can be just as courageous, but first we must structure the context to provide just enough safety for students

to try to get to know each other and experience alternative perspectives on the world. At Illinois, we are building on the work of a model developed at Michigan in our Program in Intergroup Relations, which facilitates structured dialogues across small groups to create environments in which discomfort, ignorance, and even conflict are tolerated in the service of building trust and a sense of common fate.

Next fall, we will take another step by opening a new living and learning residence for first and second year students. It will be dedicated to Intergroup Relations and Multiracial Integration, with cultural programming, structured dialogues, and classes taught by faculty fellows from our Center for Democracy. The idea here is a simple one: Since most students have had very little, if any, experience in crossing the boundaries of race and ethnicity in their daily lives, we need to structure safe environments for integration, for learning how to do the hard work of reaching out and living and learning in a multiracial community.

We know that most students, majority and minority, will say that there are substantial racial tensions on campus. At the same time, they will also say that at college they have made, often for the first time in their lives, some very good, close relationships with persons of other races and ethnicities. It is our responsibility to foster these kinds of intergroup experiences, preparing the ground of daily life in our campus community. We want to encourage the actual reaching out, on the ground, from one person to another. And we recognize that if we want students to become engaged citizens of the world, people who can question that world and prod it to be a better place—somewhere they want to live—we must invite them to change higher education, to share it, and to make it stretch to fit them. We want our students to change our university and to make it better.

Knowing the other, shaping the self
We have a hope in this nation that we can draw on the talent, skill, insight, and imagination of all of our citizens, and higher education must help to lead the way. With a nod to Walt Whitman, the poet Langston Hughes expressed this hope—this conviction—in an equally powerful way, in a poem entitled “I, Too.”³

I, too, sing America.

*I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.*

*Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
“Eat in the kitchen,”
Then.*

*Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed—*

I, too, am America.

To lead the way toward fulfilling this hope, we in higher education must figure out how to sit together around our table and engage with difference. It is through this social introspection, done in the company of others and informed by the clash of perspectives, that liberal learning occurs, sustained by difference and strengthened by the solidarity that follows. □

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aacu.org, with the author's name on the subject line.

END NOTES

1. See the Guiding Principles for the Center for Liberal Education and Civic Engagement, a cooperative effort of AAC&U and Campus Compact.
2. www.vceducation.org/peace/schools/ukraine208.html.
3. From *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, by Langston Hughes, copyright © 1994 by The Estate of Langston Hughes. Used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House, Inc.

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